

Want to Understand Islam? Start Here.

By John L. Esposito
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Nearly half of Americans have a generally unfavorable view of Islam, according to a 2006 Washington Post-ABC News poll, a number that has risen since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. That climate makes it easy to lose sight of the fact that the majority of mainstream Muslims hate terrorism and violence as much as we do -- and makes it hard for non-Muslims to know where to begin to try to understand a great world faith.

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam originated in the Middle East. As F.E. Peters shows in *"The Children of Abraham,"* the commonalities can be striking. Muslims worship the God of Abraham, as do Christians and Jews. Islam was seen as a continuation of the Abrahamic faith tradition, not a totally new religion. Muslims recognize the biblical prophets and believe in the holiness of God's revelations to Moses (in the Torah) and Jesus (in the Gospels). Indeed, Musa (Moses), Issa (Jesus) and Mariam (Mary) are common Muslim names.

Muslims believe in Islam's five pillars, which are straightforward and simple. To become a Muslim, one need only offer the faith's basic credo, "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the prophet of God." This statement reflects the two main fundamentals of Islamic faith: belief in the one true God, which carries with it a refusal to worship anything else (not money, not career, not ego), and the crucial importance of Muhammad, God's messenger.

Muhammad is the central role model for Muslims -- much like Jesus is for Christians, except solely human. He is seen as the ideal husband, father and friend, the ultimate political leader, general, diplomat and judge. Understanding Muhammad's special place in Muslim hearts helps us appreciate the widespread anger of many mainstream Muslims -- not just extremists -- with the denigration of a Muhammad-like figure in Salman Rushdie's 1988 novel *"The Satanic Verses,"* the controversial 2005 Danish cartoons depicting Muhammad in unflattering lights or Pope Benedict XVI's 2006 speech quoting a long-dead Byzantine emperor who accused the prophet of bringing "only evil and inhuman" things into the world. Karen Armstrong's *"Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time"* and Tariq Ramadan's *"In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad"* provide fresh, perceptive views on his modern-day relevance.

The three next pillars of Islam are prayer, which is to be performed five times daily; giving alms, in the form of an annual wealth tax that helps support the poor; and

fasting during daylight in the holy month of Ramadan. The fifth pillar requires that Muslims perform the pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca at least once.

We tend to equate Islam with the Arab world, but the largest Muslim communities are found in Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and Nigeria. Only about one in five of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims are Arabs. Islam is the second-largest religion in Europe and the third-largest in the United States.

The treatment of women under Islam is also wildly diverse. In countries such as Saudi Arabia, women must be fully covered in public, cannot drive cars and struggle for the right to vote. But elsewhere, Muslim women freely enter politics, drive motorcycles and wear everything from saris to pantsuits. Women can get university educations and pursue professional careers in Egypt, Syria, Iran, Turkey, Malaysia and Indonesia; they have been heads of state in Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia.

Anyone who has followed the news from Iraq has heard a lot about Sunnis and Shiites, the faith's two major branches. About 85 percent of the world's Muslims are Sunni, with about 15 percent Shiite. The division stems from a bitter dispute after Muhammad's death over who should take over the leadership of the newly founded Muslim community. Sunnis believed that the most qualified person should succeed the prophet, but a minority thought that his descendants should carry his mantle. That minority was known as the followers or partisans (Shiites) of Ali; they believed that Muhammad had designated Ali, his cousin and son-in-law, as his heir. Historically, Shiites have viewed themselves as oppressed and disenfranchised under Sunni rule -- a longstanding grievance that has flared up again in recent years in such countries as Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Pakistan. Vali Nasr's *"The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future"* does a fine job of distinguishing between theology and politics in today's Sunni-Shiite rivalries.

Muslims also argue over what some refer to as Islam's sixth pillar, jihad. In the Koran, Islam's sacred text, jihad means "to strive or struggle" to realize God's will, to lead a virtuous life, to create a just society and to defend Islam and the Muslim community. But historically, Muslim rulers, backed by religious scholars, used the term to legitimize holy wars to expand their empires. Contemporary extremists -- most notably Osama bin Laden -- also appeal to Islam to bless their attacks. My book *"Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam"* tackles this theme, as does Fawaz Gerges's *"Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy."*

The Gallup World Poll's helpful section on the Muslim world (<http://www.muslimwestfacts.com>) sheds some light on the views and aspirations of more than 1 billion Muslims. My years studying those attitudes suggest that Muslim hostility toward the West is mostly political, not religious, and that Muslims hope the

West will show their faith more respect. In our post-9/11 world, the ability to distinguish between Islam itself and Muslim extremism will be critical. Only thus will we be able to avoid pushing away mainstream Muslims around the world, marginalizing Muslim citizens at home and alienating the allies we need to help us fight global terrorism.

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